

# STRATEGIC PLAN

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## Promoting Racial Equity in the Child Welfare System

**Central Region Transformation Team**

**2/4/2010**

The purpose of this strategic plan is to propose a course of action for identifying and transforming the racial barriers within the child welfare system that damage and destabilize children and families of color.



## AUTHORS' PAGE

The Central Region Transformation Team is comprised of the following individuals:

Tamela Atwood	Investigation Supervisor – DCFS - Urbana
Robert Blackwell	Regional Administrator – DCFS - Central Region
Karen Blum	Foster Care Administrator -Baby Fold - Normal
Mary Bullock	Asst. Regional Administrator - DCFS- Peoria Subregion
James Craven	Asst. Regional Administrator - DCFS- Springfield Subregion
Rochelle Crump	Administrator, Affirmative Action - DCFS- -Chicago
Ron Dozier	Retired Judge – Bloomington
Lolita Dumas	Executive Director – Family Advocacy Center – Champaign
Gerissa Eppinger	Executive Director – Family Does Matter – Peoria
Sarah Gardner	Affirmative Action Officer – DCFS - Springfield
Oscar Gipson	Board President – Family Advocacy Center – Champaign
Tammy Grant	Personnel Liaison - DCFS-- Central Region
Juliana Harms	Clinical Staff – DCFS – Peoria Subregion
Judy Hendricks	Executive Director - Lifeline Family Services
Greg Hixon	LAN Liaison - DCFS- Peoria
Wanda Holloway	Trainer - Governors State University - Springfield
Darrin Holt	Administrator - Lutheran Social Services - Champaign
Shelly Knuppel	Managing Attorney - DCFS-Springfield
Paula McClain	Investigative Supervisor – DCFS - Charleston
Madeleine McLaughlan	Asst. State’s Attorney – McLean County
Rev. Frank McSwain	Exec. Dir. – Family and Community Resource Center Bloomington
Maria Miller	Asst. Regional Administrator – DCFS – Champaign Subregion
Jere Moore	Vice President - Lutheran Social Services - Peoria
Arricka Newingham	Investigative Supervisor – DCFS - Lincoln
Jane Norman	Investigations Manager – DCFS - Rock Island
Brenda Porter	Licensing Representative – DCFS - Bloomington
Jamie Ralph	Investigative Manager – DCFS - Bloomington
Cynthia Richter	Quality Assurance Specialist – DCFS - Canton



Leshonda Rogers Lolita Smith	Executive Director - Primed for Life Inc. - Springfield Intact Supervisor - DCFS – Springfield
Dr. Terry Solomon Gail Steidl Celestine Taylor	Exec. Dir. – Ill. African American Family Commission –Chicago Intact Manager – DCFS – Champaign Subregion Placement Supervisor – DCFS – Decatur
Hector Vazquez Tracy Vinson Thu Vo	Investigator – DCFS – Rock Island Adoptions Worker – DCFS – Springfield Assistant to the Director – DCFS – Chicago
Terry Walters Roger Washington Jamie Webster-Hall	Investigator – DCFS - Urbana Investigator – DCFS - Springfield Attorney – DCFS – Peoria
Patricia Welander Greg Westbrooks Danielle Zeller	State-Wide/Regional FC Advisory – Bloomington Program Administrator – Catholic Charities – Peoria Area Director- Catholic Charities – Springfield

**Crossroad Facilitators**

Anne Stewart	Co-Lead Trainer
Charles (Chuck) Reuhle	Co-Lead Trainer
Joy Bailey	Trainer
Pakou Her	Trainer

**Illinois African American Family Commission**

Reiko Suber	Permanency Enhancement Project Support Staff
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this strategic plan is to propose a course of action for identifying and transforming the racial barriers within the child welfare system that damage and destabilize children and families' of color. Like other public institutions in the U.S., the child welfare system has ignored the pervasiveness of racism and devalued the importance of racial identity in establishing policies, practices, and goals for stabilizing and strengthening children and families of color.

In 2007, the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services – Central Region hosted the *Central Region Permanency Enhancement Symposium* to discuss the problem of low permanency achievement and the impact on Children of Color. Numerous participants determined that a sustained investigation of the role of race in child welfare was required to promote racial equity. These administrators and practitioners from various public and private child-serving agencies agreed to attend a series of multi-day workshops over the course of 7 months. This resulted in the development of recommendations for reforming the system in ways that honor the identity of children of color and for addressing the racial disparities they face in navigating foster care.

During this sustained investigation, the Central Region Transformation Team targeted four main areas of the child welfare system *Community Engagement, Court Policies and Practices, Training and Professional Development, and Personnel Policies and Practices*. Initiatives focus on the following goals:

- To strengthen the level of community engagement to prevent children from coming into foster care
- to debunk the myth of colorblindness that undergirds the court system and facilitate dialogues about race, child welfare, and legal culture to promote racial equity
- educate child welfare professionals, caregivers and key stakeholders on the impact of institutional racism on children of color
- to recruit, hire and train personnel from racial backgrounds that are reflective of the children and families we serve

Overall, the aim of the strategic plan is to reduce the disproportionate number of children and families of color who enter the child welfare system, and improve our ability to offer equitable and racially sensitive services to all of our clients.

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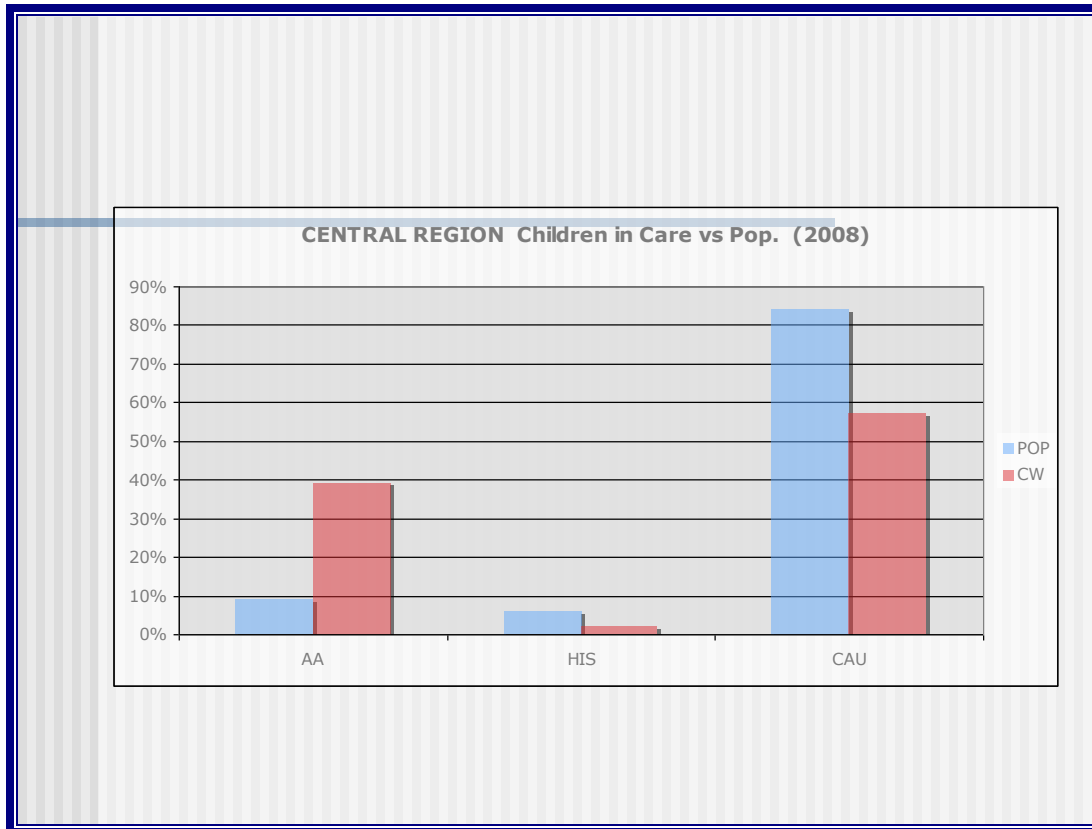
## BACKGROUND

Nationwide, it is estimated that over one-half million children live in foster care as a result of state interventions aimed at protecting them from harmful family environments (U.S. DHHS, 2002). While some children have benefited from the protections of foster care intervention, such protection has come with a heavy price regarding children's long-term outcomes (Barth, 2000; Howard, Smith, & Ryan, 2004; Wind, Brooks, & Barth, 2005; Zosky, Howard, Smith, Howard, & Shelvin, 2005). Although children who are placed into state-managed foster care may be safe from physical harm, they are at significant risk for developmental and emotional difficulties as a result of a history of abuse and/or neglect, disrupted family attachments, multiple caretaking arrangements, and a lack of parental continuity during their formative years of life (Barth & Berry, 1988; Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990; Fahlberg, 1979; Howard et al., 2004).

Statewide and national data have shown for decades that African American youth are more likely to enter foster care, less likely to receive adequate services while in care, and less likely to return home or to achieve family permanency through adoption or guardianship. Current reviews of Illinois' permanency statistics reveal the following:

- ❖ African American children are less likely than other children to achieve permanency at 12 or 36 months
- ❖ African American children have longer stays in care
- ❖ African American children are currently and historically greatly over-represented in foster care
- ❖ African American children are more likely to have the goal of "independence" compared to their Caucasian peers who are more likely to have a permanency goal of return home or adoption. (See ISU Permanency Data Notebook, 2008).

**Figure 1:** In the Central Region of the State, African American children are over-represented in foster care compared to their presence in the population. This overrepresentation is also documented in all other regions of the states.



### **Barriers to Permanency for Children of Color**

In March 2007, the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services-Central Region convened a “Permanency Enhancement Symposium” to engage stakeholders in a dialogue to identify solutions to the problem of low permanency achievement and its particular impact on Children of Color, with particular emphasis on African American children. Stakeholders identified several barriers to permanency that clustered around 3 primary domains:

*Agency- Related Barriers:*

- Cumbersome, disjointed child welfare policies and procedures
- Overlapping initiatives that drain staff's time and resources
- Lack of culturally responsive family engagement practices among some agency staff
- Lack of collaboration with courts
- Lack of sufficient linkages to community-based resources
- Lack of service providers in rural communities
- Lack of front-line staff input before new policies are initiated

*Court-Related Barriers:*

- Inconsistent decision making across jurisdictions
- Lack of judicial awareness about minimum parenting standards and risk
- Lack of awareness about emotional trauma caused by parent-child separation
- Unrealistic “middle class expectations” for parents
- Lack of awareness about cultural differences among diverse family types
- Lack of respect for worker's expertise and experience (e.g. overriding worker's recommendations)

*Community-Related Barriers:*

- Lack of local, culturally responsive service providers in the areas of domestic violence treatment, substance abuse treatment, parent education, crisis intervention, and legal advocacy.
- Lack of community ownership and investment in resources to support struggling families
- Misperception that DCFS is the primary source of support for families in crisis
- Insufficient cross-systems collaboration

In each of the above described domains (i.e. Courts, agency, community), stakeholders cited a ***lack of “cultural competence”*** among key decision makers and service providers as a primary reason that African American children are vulnerable to entering and remaining in foster care at disproportional rates (Houston, 2007).

## **Central Region Builds the Capacity for Change**

Following the symposia Central Region's Permanency Enhancement Steering Committee decided to meet the issues of disproportionality and disparate outcomes for Children of Color at its historical and social foundation, Racism. Institutional or structural

racism in the prevailing American society was then identified as traumatic and systems-based cause of many of our negative outcomes for children and families of color.

Recognizing the limitations of “self-examination” in the Illinois Child Welfare System, the Region enlisted the expertise of Crossroads, an anti-racism training and organizing organization, to assist in establishing the capacity to engage in this most complex and controversial topic. The Region then engaged in an 11 month Crossroad’s facilitated process of planning, designing, recruiting and selecting a Regional Transformation Team. The Transformation Team training began in October 2008 and consisted of 10 days of training over the next 7 months.

The overall objective of the training then, was establishing the capacity of the Region to change the ways in which the child welfare system damages or destabilizes children and families of color and in doing so achieve better outcomes. The methodology of Crossroads centered on the following:

- Educating the participants through an analysis of Racism in America.
- Team building with participants in order to mutually support each other through a shared transformation to an anti-racist social construct. And,
- Teaching the participants how to apply anti-racists practices and/or a racial equity lens to critical-decision components (e.g., abuse/neglect reporting, protective custody, decisions to place, etc..) of the Illinois Child Welfare System.

The Crossroad philosophy and methodology, including a detailed outline and purpose of Transformation Team development and implementation may be viewed on their website at [crossroadsantiracism.org](http://crossroadsantiracism.org) ( see *Crossroads Anti-Racism Organizing and Training*).

Co-facilitated by the trainers Anne Stewart and Charles (Chuck) Reuhle, the team was meticulously and artfully guided through a process which deepened the internal life of the team through various exercises. In particular, the use of “One on One” meetings between members of the team with each other and with as many individual team members as time allowed, helped to cement personal bonds. These bonds were frequently drawn upon during the entire process and will support the work beyond the training.

The team also developed a common understanding and language around racism through the *analysis phase* of the training. With the analysis in hand the group was able to apply the anti-racist pedagogy to key aspects of the child welfare system in Illinois and Central Region. Sensitive to the scope of “systemic and/or institutionalized racism” and the complexities of the child welfare system, the team chose to focus its attention on 4 key

areas. These areas included; I. Community Engagement; II. Court Policies and Practices; III. Training and Professional Development, and; IV. Personnel Policies and Practices.

Central to any transformation process is the capacity to effectuate desired change in a system or systems. Methods and strategies for organizing the Illinois Child Welfare System and its specific parts were introduced by the trainers and incorporated by the Transformation Team into a set of “*Strategic Initiatives*”. As an expression of the team’s collective work and responsibility, a shared “Vision Statement was developed to guide our work. See **Vision Statement**.

The result of the Transformation Team’s training and organizing is represented in a list of recommendations, developed exclusively by the team, owned by each member of the team through their direct involvement is this document, The Strategic Plan. The plan maps both a rationale and selected strategies in the domains of , community engagement, court policies and practices, training and professional development and personnel policies and practices aimed at reducing the disproportionate number of Children and Families of Color who enter the child welfare system. The Plan’s execution will also result in a reduction and further the eventual elimination of disparate outcomes posited upon Children of Color as a result of race and racism. See **Strategic Initiatives**.

## VISION STATEMENT



We, the Central Region Transformation Team, are an anti-racist organization embracing all children and their families, treating them with respect without biases and prejudice regarding race, language, culture, and housing environment. We empower families to remain intact with removal occurring only after an objective risk assessment free of subjective beliefs and values regarding race. If circumstances require removal, we will make every effort to reunify the family through services that families can access without fear. We vow to collaborate with community officials and leaders to perpetuate this vision and to ensure its continuous effectiveness for the preservation of families.

## **TIMELINE**

### *Regional Planning and Transformation Team Implementation*

<b>March 2007</b>	Central Region Permanency Enhancement Symposium
<b>November 2007</b>	Selection of Regional Planning and Design Team  2 ½ Day Analysis Training of Permanency Steering Committee, Tinley Park, IL  Selection of Regional Transformation Team
<b>October 2007</b>	One Day Team Orientation, Bloomington, IL
<b>November 2008</b>	3 ½ Day Team Training, Bloomington, IL
<b>January 2009</b>	3 Day Team Skills Training, Bloomington, IL
<b>March 2009</b>	2 Day Team Skills Training, Bloomington, IL
<b>March 2009</b>	2 ½ Day Analysis Training for Director and Executive Staff, Chicago, IL
<b>April 2009</b>	Strategic Plan Writing Workshop, ISU-Normal, IL
<b>February 2010</b>	1 <sup>st</sup> Quarterly Meeting of the Regional Transformation Team
<b>March -April 2010</b>	Presentation of Strategic Initiatives to Director and Executive Staff

## **STRATEGIC INITIATIVES**

- I. Community Engagement
- II. Court Policies and Practices
- III. Training and Professional Development
- IV. Personnel Policies and Practices



## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The first initiative is geared towards preventing children from coming into foster care by supporting, strengthening, and stabilizing families through the employment of community-based resources. When a child must be removed from the home, substantial effort must be made to place the child in an environment that honors and supports the child's identity.

In order to address the above stated issues, the Central Region Transformation Team will collaborate with the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services and community stakeholders such as:

Local Action Teams	Family Advocacy Centers
LANs	Faith Based Organizations
University Partners	Illinois African American Family Commission

The collaboration of community partners is vital because it assists in building a network of support that actively strengthens and supports families. This partnership is formed by making community members aware of the resources available to them. At the same time, it is important that community-based organizations make their services accessible to families and are encouraged to address racial disparities. Both parties must be educated in the circumstances that lead to children entering and exiting the child welfare system. By collaborating, families will be better equipped to provide for the needs of children and prevent children from entering the system.

We suggest the following strategies be employed to strengthen the level of community engagement:

- ❖ Host community forums and town hall meetings to inform community members and local organizations about racial disparity and disproportionality in the child welfare system
- ❖ Empower community leaders to facilitate dialogues about racial disparity and disproportionality
- ❖ Introduce the Family Advocacy Centers to communities in the central region
- ❖ Sustain family stability by linking parents and youth with community resources
- ❖ Educate community stakeholders about the criteria for children entering and exiting the child welfare system
- ❖ Promote initiatives from within the local community that aim to eliminate racial disparity and disproportionality of children in the child welfare system

## COURT POLICIES AND PRACTICES

Legal systems often claim to function on the premise of colorblindness in which race is considered irrelevant and a non-essential factor in forming legal decisions. The Central Region Transformation Team contends that the notion of 'blind justice' is in fact a counterproductive ideology precisely because it fails to take into consideration the importance of racial identity and the damaging impact of societal and institutional racism on the lives of Children and Families of Color. We posit that race must be a line of inquiry in order to illuminate disparities and make decisions that aim to achieve fairness.

The myth of race neutrality has been indoctrinated into the hearts and minds of court personnel also. Therefore, the Central Region Transformation Team advocates for the re-education of legal stakeholders about the racial disparities and disproportionality when determining the removal of a child from his or her home or in making decisions about placement.

The effects of colorblindness and race neutrality have disempowered families of color, particularly African American birth parents and relatives serving as caregivers. In many cases their racial and cultural background has been viewed as deficient or delinquent which has resulted in the termination of parental rights and the denial of relatives to care for their children. It is for this reason that we also insist that families potentially facing these racial barriers should have legal representation in court.

### Changing Legal Culture

The Central Region Transformation Team recommends that legal stakeholders and legal culture adopt the following values:

**Value** family permanency for all children

**Balance** child safety and child permanency when making decisions that will effect a child's lifelong trajectory

**Employ** culturally responsive strategies when assessing risk and safety standards for all children

**Recognize** the signs of emotional trauma from foster care placement

**Honor, value, and utilize** the bonds of extended family in supporting a child's social and emotional growth

## **The Re-Education of Court Personnel**

Judges, attorneys and other court personnel who work within the juvenile court system spend years studying the standard elements of law which are generally known and free from doubt or dispute. However they have not received formal training on issues related to the child welfare system and permanency. The Central Region Transformation Team will assist in providing information and training to court personnel. We believe that the goal of racial equity can be realized when court personnel increase their knowledge by:

- ❖ Understanding the risk of removing a child from his or her home versus permitting the child to remain
- ❖ Understanding the emotional trauma that may result from removing a child from his or her home
- ❖ Understanding the remedial and corrective benefit of family maintenance services aimed at families in need
- ❖ Understanding the importance and impact of kinship care on a child's identity formation
- ❖ Understanding the sense of alienation and mistrust that prevents parents from engaging in the legal process
- ❖ Understanding the importance of considering cultural traditions and family customs when assessing family safety
- ❖ Understanding family and child-centered strategies for assessing "Reasonable Efforts" analysis
- ❖ Understanding pertinent child welfare and child protection legislation, executive orders and relevant statutes, including:
  - a. The Illinois Child Care Act
  - b. The Juvenile Court Act
  - c. The Illinois Abused and Neglected Children's Reporting Act (ANCRA)

In order to accomplish these tasks, the Central Region Transformation Team will collaborate with the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services' Office of Training, Illinois Juvenile Court Services, Illinois State University School of Social Work, the Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts and the Illinois African-American Family Commission. Our goal is to educate court personnel who have expressed a desire to learn more about the impact of racial disparities on children of color. Specifically, a pilot

program for *Conversations about Race and Child Welfare* will be launched beginning with a 2-hour introductory workshop.

## **Legal Representation for Families of Color**

Many children are wrongly removed from their family and never able to return home. Moreover, many families do not have resources to pay for a private attorney. The Family Advocacy Centers dispatch social workers and caseworkers to assist parents in understanding the legal proceedings as it relates to child protection and permanency. In the court, legal representation is provided for the state, foster parents, and the child. However, legal counsel for birth parents and relative caregivers is only provided if they retain a private attorney. As a result, The Central Region Transformation Team recognizes that it is important for birth parents and relative caregivers to have legal representation to help them understand court proceedings and to advocate on their behalf.

### *Advocacy and Education*

In order to provide advocacy and quality legal care, the Illinois African-American Family Commission will hire a Reconciliation and Disproportionality Advocate in each sub-region to represent Family Advocacy Centers' clients regarding cases involving the termination of parental rights, return-home goals, and relative caregivers. Eligible cases will be identified by the Illinois African American Family Commission in collaboration with the Family Advocacy Centers.

The Central Region Transformation will provide educational trainings on racial disparities in the child welfare system for self-elected court personnel. These trainings will be coordinated by the Illinois African-American Family Commission and serve as a pilot for the Reconciliation and Disproportionality Project held in Bloomington, Peoria, and Springfield, Illinois beginning in January 2010.

By dispatching advocates to families in need and providing training for court personnel on racial disparities, we seek to increase knowledge and understanding in the following areas:

- ❖ child welfare risk assessment standards and protocols
- ❖ alternatives to foster care placement (e.g., family preservation services)
- ❖ trauma experienced by children who are separated from family
- ❖ client service plan goals
- ❖ role of child placement workers
- ❖ available resources for families

- ❖ cultural dynamics that impact risk assessment and child welfare service delivery

## TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The training of child welfare professionals, foster caregivers, and other key stakeholders is an invaluable opportunity to prepare them to identify and respond to institutional racism. Learning about the racial barriers that Children of Color face upon entering and exiting the child welfare system must be integrated into their professional curriculum. The Central Region Transformation Team posits the following educational strategies for addressing this issue:

- ❖ Members of the Transformation Team and key stakeholders will form a subcommittee which will be responsible for developing a plan to educate community stakeholders of the impact of racial and ethnic disproportionality and disparity
- ❖ Individuals from the Training Institute will be invited to participate in the *Crossroads* program in order to identify individuals to serve as co-facilitators for the *Dismantling Institutional Racism Training* for child welfare professionals and foster caregivers
- ❖ Participants in the Crossroads program will generate media such as announcements, newsletters, emails, etc. to share information about antiracist work with direct service staff members.
- ❖ Ongoing consultation will be provided to the Training Institute's Learning Collaboratives and Foster PRIDE regarding strategies for incorporating information and experiences from the *Dismantling Institutional Racism Training*.

We believe that increased awareness about institutional awareness along with ongoing support to participants in the educational trainings will make a significant impact on reducing the disproportionate number of children of color in the child welfare system.

## PERSONNEL POLICIES AND HIRING PRACTICES

The Central Region Transformation Team recognizes the importance of children and families of color being served by professionals who have an experiential understanding of their point of view. In some cases, this will require the child welfare system to recruit, hire, and train personnel from racial backgrounds that reflect the background of children and families of color. Changing the racial composition of personnel may not eliminate racism, but it can play an important role in building a network of colleagues and allies committed to fighting against racial barriers in the child welfare system. To that end, we recommend that the following actions take place:

- ❖ Review the personnel process to include recruitment, application, interview/selection, promotion and disciplinary process
- ❖ Expand the choices for county preferences to increase the applicant pool in ways that are more inclusive of professionals from diverse racial ethnic minority backgrounds
- ❖ Examine the interview process to determine racial bias in selecting candidates for hire
- ❖ Review all disciplinary reports for the past 3 years to determine racial bias.
- ❖ Develop a racially equitable interview process
- ❖ Provide a *Crossroads Training* for administrators from the OIG and Labor Relations department

We believe that reexamining and revising the hiring process will allow for more qualified professionals of color to apply for key positions, thereby diversifying the workforce and improving the quality of service we provide to children and families of color.

## CONCLUSION

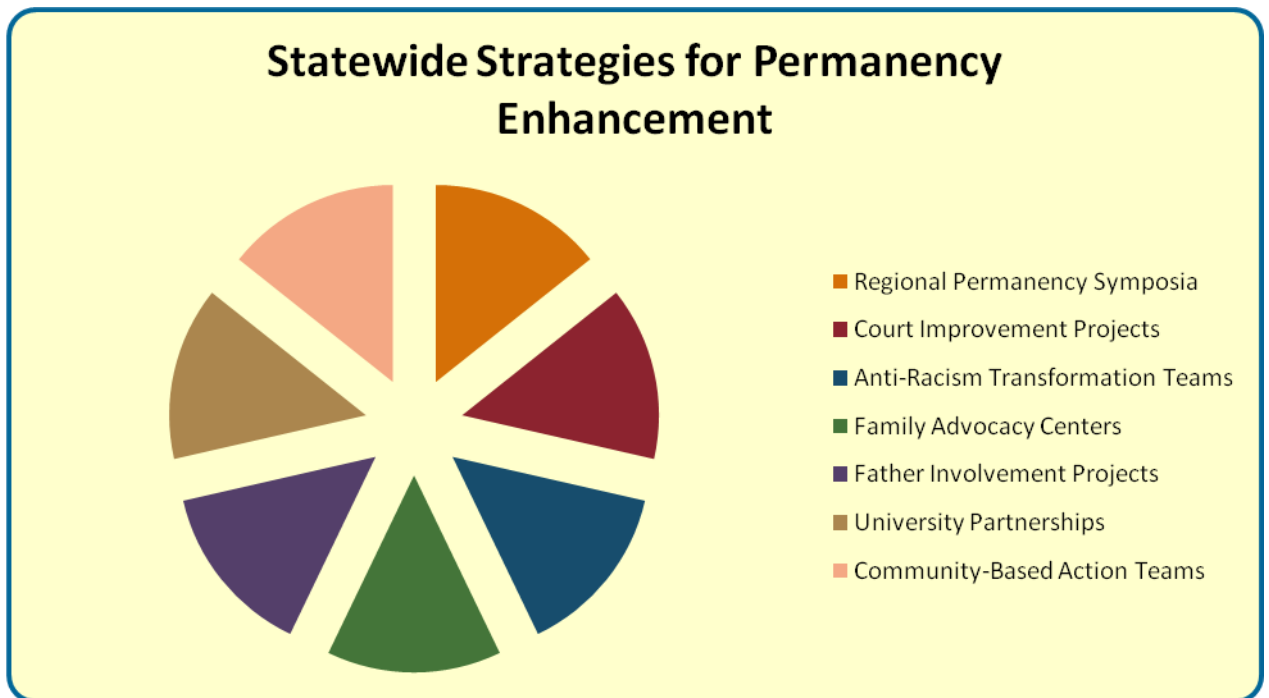
Any realistic effort to transform the child welfare system in Illinois must be guided by the relative value of our objectives and the context in which our efforts operate. Improving permanency outcomes for Children and Families of Color leaves the Transformation Team and the larger child welfare industry little choice but earnest engagement. Social work defines each of us, from prosecutor to day care operator, from researcher to hotline worker, judge to clinician, licensing worker to advocate, investigator to therapist. Our charge is to “protect children through strengthening and supporting families”.

The work of the Central Region Transformation Team is embedded in a larger body of work underway in Illinois to better “inform its practices” to the benefit of children and families who require protection and services. We seek to develop practices based on evidence generated through rigorous research so that they will be sound and prove to yield successful results over time. During the past three years the Department’s Permanency Enhancement Initiatives have combined with *Trauma-Informed Practices, Integrated Assessments, Geo-Mapping of Resources, Family Advocacy Centers* and now *Differential Response* to create a more family-focused, strength based model of child welfare practice.

It was the combination of the Statewide Strategies for Permanency Enhancement that gave rise to and now undergirds the efforts of the Central Region Transformation Team and those Regional teams to follow that seek to create a “race-informed” system committed to and with the capacity to promote racial equity in the Child Welfare System. See Figure 2:



Figure 2. Statewide Strategies for Permanency



These strategies include:

1. Convening “Permanency Symposia” in the Central, Southern, Northern, and Cook County regions of the state (2006-2007) to inform and engage local stakeholders in a dialogue about solutions to the problem of inadequate permanency planning and achievement;
2. Engaging in collaborative partnerships between the Illinois courts, DCFS, and community stakeholders to implement “Juvenile Court Improvement Projects” to address court-specific permanency achievement barriers
3. Facilitating local “Action Teams” made up of parents, DCFS administrators and field staff, child welfare licensed agency staff, social workers, court personnel, educators, and community leaders who are charged with initiating community-based strategies to support families and improve permanency
4. Supporting “Fatherhood Initiatives” geared toward increasing services to fathers and implementing specific service plan goals for non-custodial parents

5. Funding of “Family Advocacy Centers” in targeted communities and cities with high protective custody rates and low permanency achievement rates for the purpose of enhancing support to struggling families and diverting children from foster care
6. Investing in an *Anti-Racism Curriculum (i.e. Crossroads and the Peoples Institute)*, and long-term *“Transformation Teams”*.

Provided to us through the engagement of child welfare professionals, court personnel, educators and community advocates in our Permanency Symposia is the stark reality of a system of care that despite its best intentions harbors, sustains and unwittingly promotes disparities in its delivery of services. That children and families of color are negatively and disproportionately represented in key outcomes such as protective custody rates, number of children in care, length of stays in care, etc., was a major outcome of these deliberations. The “call to action” to address these issues have brought the system face-to-face with a most historic and complex of contextual factors, racism.

Time and effort on this matter of racism will yield better results for our children and families. And while we believe that race is not the only issue facing our families, nor is racism the only context in which we and our families operate. We do and by the testimony of our collective efforts believe that the failure of a system to acknowledge the existence of racism and its traumatic effects pre-destines our children and families of color to the margins of safety, well-being and permanency.